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THE MAN WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN

A LOST BIOGRAPHY

By

ROBERT WHITAKER



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1899*

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Robert Whitaker**

*To my brother, William Carey Whitaker,
who first led my boyish thoughts to consider
my personal relation to Jesus Christ, and
whose example of faith and fidelity these
many years has been both consolation and
inspiration to me, this little volume is*

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PROLOGUE.

THE STORY OF ESAU.

“And Jacob sod pottage; and Esau came in from the field and he was faint; and Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint; therefore his name was called Edom. And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die; and what profit shall the birthright do to me? And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him; and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way; so Esau despised his birthright.”

“Bread
and pottage.”

Genesis, XXV, 29-34.

THE MAN WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN

BY

ROBERT WHITAKER



I.

THE MAN WHO WAS.

He died at noontime, in the noon tide of the year. Like one of old, whom otherwise he least resembled, death met him in the fullness of his powers. "His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." One moment he talked with his beloved about the common things of daily life—about the midday meal. Another moment and his heart had ceased to beat, the color had fled from his cheeks, the strong limbs were limp and helpless, and the watchers in hushed accents and with frightened faces whispered, "He is dead."

"In such
an hour as
ye think not."

And then the word went out over all the land. And a thousand pens were busy reciting the story of his life. For weeks the types were burdened with his name. There were innumerable repetitions of a few familiar facts. There were judgments, diverse in form and particular statement, but strikingly unanimous in substance and intent. And there were homilies not a few, according to the standpoint from which each

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"De mortuis
nil nisi
bonum."

writer wrote. The orthodox pointed a moral in accordance with their faith. The liberal did likewise. Few there were of any faith, or no faith at all, who after the elemental facts were stated, and the judgment on this life pronounced, did not find therein something to sustain their standards, and fortify them in their beliefs.

There was an unexpected tenderness in all the comment upon him, even from the pens of those whom he had most hated and opposed. Some indeed suggested that perchance his opinions concerning both history and destiny had experienced very considerable modification since his sudden exit from this mundane sphere into the vast unknown. But there was no ring of exultation that an enemy was gone, no impeachment of his motives, no attempt to hide his merits, no manifestation of the bitterness which his opponents had sometimes shown in earlier years. There was pity for his loved ones, praise for his personal excellencies, compassion over his mistakes. The world laid him away reluctantly, and yet with no profound regret, except that being what he was he had not been the man he might have been. And over his grave friend and foe alike confessed the huge failure of his life. The confession was not always clear and plain, but the word was there in nearly every case, even when cov-

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"A tale
that is told."

ered to the careless eye with rhapsody and eulogy, and buried deep under fading flowers of speech. Some so far forgot what he might have been as they remembered what he was that they almost said his life was a success. Yet at the last these also caught themselves, and owned with tears or forced sighs something of disappointment and regret.

Concerning these few facts they were all in general agreed. He was born when the first third of our century had slipped away, and his years were done just before the century closed. His father was a preacher of the faith so hated and combated by the son. A Congregational clergyman, when the ancestral faith of New England was still bound more or less with the grave clothes of medievalism, this father had not lived an altogether tranquil life. His pastorates were many, and as to most of them their time was short. He worked slowly westward, and at the age of ten the lad with honey on his lips found himself in the young and thriving commonwealth of Illinois. Here the boy grew to manhood's years. He had never loved the faith of his father, perhaps because the father suffered unjust accusation and petty persecution from those who thought they loved it more. Perhaps the boy's revolt was helped by the very strictness of his training, for in after years he spoke mockingly and with bitter-

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"Melancholy
madness."

ness of the Sundays of his boyhood, when he was compelled to go to church two or three times a day, with Sunday School sandwiched in between, and gave this rigid training as a cause of his unbelief. Whatever the cause, the fact was soon apparent that here was no mild skeptic, no indifferent deserter from the popular belief. He derided the faith which his father had preached, and as the power and popularity of his unscrupulous attacks upon it were made manifest to him the virulence of his language and the bitterness of his opposition to it seemed to increase. He turned to law and politics for his livelihood, but reaped a fortune from his lectures against the Bible and the Christian belief. Yet he suffered loss and disadvantage, it was said, rather than surrender one iota of his liberty of speech, his right to unrestricted utterance of his thought. But whether he suffered more for love of liberty than for hate of religion who shall say? There was a day when he might have been Governor of Illinois, and beyond that shining goal were other summits of political attainment which seemed to invite his feet. But rather than consent to be silent concerning the thing which he most detested, which was more loved of the common heart than he ever guessed, he laid aside his ambition, and helped another to the place. He won some measure of political renown by

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

his fair eulogies of the Plumed Knight, yet did not help his leader to the honor which he asked for him. In war he played an inconspicuous and quite indifferent part. As a lawyer he succeeded, not as one profoundly versed in law, nor as one whose probity was beyond that of his fellows at the bar, but as a gifted advocate, with power to picture things in words, and sway awhile the hearts of men. And his home life, it was everywhere reported, was very fair to see. He was the faithful husband, the fond and careful father. The women of his household worshiped him, who gave them back a fullness of love and homage such as too many wives and daughters seek in vain. They knew no other worship than the love of one another. It was only moonlight on the water, as our own Longfellow sang, but they saw so much of beauty in it they would not lift their eyes to see the planets overhead, while he laughed derisively at others who preferred the glory of the sky to its best reflection in life's shadowed stream. And while he laughed the shadow from above fell suddenly upon him, and the glory at his feet died away. And many said, "He was honest." Many said, "He was clever." Many said, "He was kind and true." But because of him many kept sad eyes upon the stream, looking for love, and happiness, and hope, nor found them as he had found them for a little while,

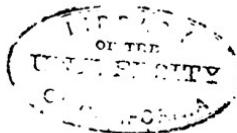
"As a symbol
of love in
heaven."

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"And its
wavering
image here."

because the stream was darker and swifter where they stood. And when they were urged to look upward where there was light for all they mockingly made answer, "Nay, there is nothing up there. He said so, and his words were wonderfully sweet and good. Somewhere in the stream he found the glory that we seek. He would not lift eyes upward, why should we, since he taught us that the upward look is all a hollow cheat?" And even his beloved, whom he had taught to think that the shimmering glory on the stream was the only bright reality, still looked into the dark waters, although the glory was altogether gone. But all who had caught the beauty of the moon and stars, and the measureless depth of the sky that was softly reddening toward the dawn, sighed as they remembered the music of his voice, and looked on the beauty of his face, and said, Alas! Alas!

* * *



II.

THE MAN WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

Back in his boyhood years there came a change. Of the details of that experience he could never speak, but the same Jesus who was seen by the persecutor of Tarsus was made manifest to the understanding of this lad, already far more concerned than he himself apprehended with the problems of the soul. He stood on a little rise in a great sweep of western prairie. The sun was setting beyond the river, with its fringe of trees. The mood of evening was upon him, and the silence of the closing day seemed more of the inner man than of the world without. And in that silence the still small voice of the ever-living Christ spoke plainly to his heart. There was a little while of overwhelming self-consciousness. Like Peter, when he cried aloud, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord," the sense of his own unworthiness was so strong upon him that he could not stand and face the setting sun. Down on his face in the swaying grass he fell, and lay there for a time like one who was dead. When he lifted up his face it seemed as if the glory that had faded from the skies had been gathered into his eyes. He sat, unspeaking or unmoving, till the

"The heavenly
vision."

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"Not con-
formed but
transformed."

darkness about him had obscured every feature of the landscape. It was so light within that he waked with surprise at the call of a familiar voice to the consciousness that it was dark without. Then rising slowly to his feet he walked with bared head under the smiling stars until his father's house was reached. No word of his experience passed between father and son, or any member of the family. Yet it soon appeared that the young man was transformed. He was not less loving, nor less sprightly in his bearing and his speech. But he was vastly more reverent, more sympathetic, more in touch with the heart of men and things. The difference deepened rather than grew less as the days advanced. He was reticent about confessing his faith at first, but it could not be concealed. And though there lingered something of his former skepticism as concerned the things which were least fundamental in his new-found faith, his devotion to the Man of Nazareth was so complete, so over-mastering, that it could not be gainsaid.

There is little need to trace his public career. He had himself inclined to law and politics, and there were many prepared to prophesy for him the largest measure of success in court and state. But his passion for the great realities, God, and Immortality, and his intense devotion to the Christ of God, swept away all

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

small considerations of gain and honor, as chips and straws are borne on the rising tide of the mighty Mississippi when the spring-time rains descend. He turned of inward necessity toward the pulpit, and rose with rapid bounds to share the pre-eminence among the princely preachers of America with his life-long friend and fellow laborer, Beecher. From the little country church where his ministry began he was called to the Church of the People in Chicago. Here for thirty years he exercised such an influence as few Americans have known. He was the champion of all the oppressed and heavy laden. In him the fugitive slave found an advocate whose eloquent appeal touched the very shackles with such fervent heat that it seemed as if they melted at his words. The Union had no nobler champion in the dark days of the Civil War. And as the tides of social discontent rose higher and higher in the metropolis of the West his was the voice which in the name of the Man of Galilee stilled the storm and calmed the waters of the sea. He was the friend of the workingman, the self-sacrificing pleader for the poor, the prophet of the better civilization, whose dawn he helped to hasten, when every man shall call his fellow, brother, and the war of selfish commercialism shall have an end. His speech on the occasion of the Anarchist Riots, will the world ever forget? His words

"Open thy mouth for the dumb."

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"And plead
the cause of
the poor and
needy."

were like blazing thunderbolts as he hurled sarcasm, story, epithet and invective in the faces of all who warred with the reign of law. Beecher's triumph at Liverpool when he turned the tides of English sympathy for the North was enacted over again. Some who heard him say that it seemed to them as if they stood in old Jerusalem, within the temple walls, and saw the wrathful Nazarene with His whip of small cords, and His burning eyes as He drove the money changers from the sacred courts. So did this young preacher, in the prime of his years, whip the modern Pharisees from the courts of social justice where they bought and sold and trafficked in the blood of men. For his was no vile vituperation of the red-flagged anarchists of public disrepute, whom indeed he did not spare. Yet his words for them were as melted butter to molten metal as compared with his scathing of the selfish rich, the unscrupulous well-to-do, the easy-going Pharisees of the labor market who have entered into the inheritance of the men who crucified the Saviour of the world. From that hour till the moment when death touched him he was the leader of the new crusade against the slavery of man to man for meat and drink. In this he made his enemies, both in church and state. But there was withal so much of the gentleness and unselfishness of the Christ whom he adored in his

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

manner and his speech, so much of natural charm in his bearing toward those who most opposed him, that he conquered often where he was hated most. He was not profound, either as a preacher or as an advocate of social reform. There were flaws without number in both his sermons and his lectures. But the great heartedness of the man, the intense earnestness and sincerity with which he spoke, his vital hold upon the great issues of life present and life to come, his happy harmony of that due regard for the realities of the unseen and the problems of the world that now is, and above all his exaltation of Jesus Christ, whom he served with the faith and fervor of an apostle, combined to make him altogether the most attractive figure in the pulpit of our land.

"The greatest
of these
is love."

This might have been the case had he been no more than the great preacher and social leader already set forth. But the larger half of his service to the world was his exaltation of every-day religion. His home life was a dream of happiness, a sermon far more eloquent than even his honeyed lips could command. No man among us has done more for marital fidelity, parental responsibility and domestic Christianity than did this pulpit prince. He counted it the happiest part of his ministry to extol those relations which next to man's relation with his God excite the profoundest emotions

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

of the heart. There was a certain fitness in him for this task. He loved as few men love, and glorified the home, whose light he was so many years, with a brightness only heaven can equal or excel. And next to that wonderful devotion which he had for Jesus Christ, aye better it were to say as a part of it, his devotion to wife, and children, and home, and the words of matchless eloquence, in which he extolled and exalted domestic virtues and family life, have endeared him beyond all expression to millions of people the wide world over who have hung upon his lips or followed his teaching on the printed page.

"Death—to life
crown or
shame."

Death gave no word of warning, but kissed him quickly on the lips and charmed him into silence ere one of the millions who would have kept him could interpose a word. He smiled, and followed swiftly into the blessed land where so many whose burdens he had lightened, whose faith in higher things he had strengthened against doubts and fears, waited for him, with, we may dare to think, some heavenly impatience to catch his eye and hear his voice again. No wonder that all men mourned him. The liberal loved him for his services to the larger faith. The orthodox for his supreme devotion to the heart of Christ and the substance of the Gospel. The Catholic spake him kindly for his gentleness and tolerance, the Protestant for his

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

frankness and his courage, the poor for his self-denying labors in their behalf, and all men for his manly, fearless bearing in his chosen walk. Even the infidel had a kindly word for this champion of the Christian faith, for though he had shown the foolishness and hollowness of unbelief, and punctured with his wit the inconsistencies and absurdities of every school of skepticism, he had so borne himself that all men bowed their heads in reverence beside his grave. And when they laid him away the glory of undimmed sunshine so filled his grave that men were astonished and looked at one another with wonder, and on every eye the tears were touched with splendor, as if each drop reflected the rainbow of eternal hope.

"O Absalom
Absalom."

* * *



*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

"Jesus
only."

EPILOGUE.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF PAUL.

" If any other man thinketh to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law found blameless. Howbeit, what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed unto his death: if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself

*The Man
Who Might Have Been.*

yet to have apprehended: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

"A Crown
of glory."

* * *

"For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." (Philippians, III, 4-14; II. Timothy, IV, 6, 7, 8. The Revision.)

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